

**Testimony of Bobbi-Jo Wathen, PhD Candidate, School Counseling Department Head
Middletown Public Schools and University of Connecticut**

in opposition of

S.B. 1095 (RAISED) AN ACT CONCERNING SCHOOL RESOURCE OFFICERS

Education Committee - March 1, 2023

Representative Currey, Senator McCrory, Representative McCarty, Senator Berthel, Vice Chair Leeper, Vice Chair Winfield and esteemed members of the Education Committee, my name is [NAME] and I am a [PROFESSION] in [NAME OF TOWN/DISTRICT] and [INCLUDE ASSOCIATION MEMBERSHIP IF APPLICABLE]. Thank you for the opportunity to offer **testimony in opposition of Senate Bill 1095 - AN ACT CONCERNING SCHOOL RESOURCE OFFICERS.**

Senate Bill 1095 adds that (ii) that individuals who are school counselors, social workers, psychologists, aides or other staff members and have appropriate training and ongoing supports may be assigned the duties of a school resource officer.

School resource officers are called to keep schools safe while building connections with students. In my school my resource officer is friendly and often an advocate to help school personnel understand the law and implications of justice involvement in early life. We are lucky that our officer understands the school to prison pipeline and advocates for minimal arrests. In our school his duties are around school safety; breaking up fights, help investigating drug activity, investigating violent activity. Our officer also works proactively to ensure that conflict that occurs in the community does not come into our school. He has alerted us to community violence and works with students and families on conflict resolution to ensure there are minimal disruptions to the school day. He is an important part of our team and we work together for a safe school community.

This bill is written in a way that puts some responsibilities on school personnel that are in direct conflict with our professional ethics. In our work as school counselors, social workers, and psychologists, the counseling relationship is sacred and should be protected at all costs. Our ethics require that we are NOT involved with discipline in or out of school. Our ethics also bind us to confidentiality unless a student is at risk of harming themselves or someone else. If we are called to search backpacks for drugs or weapons we will not be able to effectively provide the counseling support and learning needed after an incident like this happens at school. If we are called to put hands on students to break up a fight, we could be at risk of harming a student and harming our relationships. I have been a school counselor for 11 years and I have NEVER involved myself in school discipline in this way. I have been called to help students return to school after incidents with counseling sessions and conflict resolution.

As a School Counseling Department Head, I am managing the work of 11 school counselors in two different schools. Both of these schools have their challenges and I am often asking for MORE counselors and lower caseloads for my counselors. In the last 5-6 years the mental health needs of our students have increased rapidly. Our district's 504 case numbers have increased by almost 200% in 8 years, with the majority of those new cases with mental health diagnosis. My counselors are doing more clinical counseling than ever before. While they all manage high 504 caseloads, they are still providing excellent college and career counseling and working proactively by providing comprehensive school counseling lessons weekly. My team works incredibly hard and often outside of contracted hours without extra pay. We rely on our SRO and the work he does to help out program through the

relationships he has with our students and his ability to conduct important investigations. We simply cannot take on this work for both ethical violations and we simply don't have capacity.

Before working for Middletown Public Schools, I was firmly against SROs in schools. As a researcher, I see that statistically it is harmful. However, our SRO is not at all like what is explained in these studies. In fact, I think a study on how HE works in our community could help SROs across the country. He has talked staff out of justice involvement to keep young people out of the system. We have had students get involved with police in the community and they ask for him. When he shows up on the scene, the young person calms and he helps to advocate for them. At Middletown our SROs lower the rates of justice involvement through proactive practices. The other very sad reality is that school shootings are on the rise, as an employee, I feel safer knowing that having police in our building can get a faster police response with tools that educators should not have to worry about.

I would ask that you modify this bill. School counselors should not be doing the work of the School Resource Officer as it is in direct conflict with the work and role of the school counselor. Moreover, School Counselors and School Resource Officers are important partners in school community building and safety. I advocate that we keep SROs in schools with the training needed to reduce justice involvement.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

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